

Testimony by Assistant Secretary Karl F. Inderfurth  
Senate Foreign Relations Committee  
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Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I greatly appreciate this opportunity to speak with you about the topic you have chosen for today's hearing on Afghanistan -- "The Taliban: Engagement or Confrontation?" It is, as my testimony will make clear, an important, timely, and difficult subject.

**Afghan Update: Signs of Change?**

The situation in Afghanistan continues to cause grave concern to the international community, and great suffering to that country's own population. Recently Afghanistan was described in *Newsweek* as "A Country in Collapse." I cannot dispute that characterization. Some of this is the legacy of the Afghans' two decades of war -- first against the Soviet occupation, and then against each other. And yet a bitter irony is that today many of the country's problems are actually aggravated by its own would-be rulers, the Taliban. One recent telling example is the case of Mary MacMakin, a U.S. citizen who has long lived in Afghanistan and has devoted over four decades of humanitarian service to its people -- only to be detained by the Taliban and then expelled from the country this very month. We hope that Ms. MacMakin will be able to return to Afghanistan, if she so wishes, to continue her important work.

Unfortunately, however, the Taliban's overall record does not inspire much confidence in this, or any other, regard. When they swept to power from Kandahar to Kabul in late 1996, they seemed to have considerable popular acceptance, based on an understandable disgust with protracted civil war and a simple desire for personal security. Since then, while the Taliban have extended their control to cover approximately 85 percent of Afghanistan, their popularity and legitimacy now appear to be in decline. They have failed to end the civil war, and they have failed to offer the Afghan people a better life. Instead, the Taliban continue to seek a military victory over their opponents in northern Afghanistan, but that objective continues to elude their grasp. The Taliban's two offensives north of Kabul earlier this month led to the heaviest fighting of the year and ended quickly with heavy Taliban casualties and no change in the frontlines. We believe the Taliban now have little prospect of completing their goal of gaining control over the 15 percent of the country held by the opposition. In short, Mr. Chairman, we believe the Taliban have reached their high-water mark.

Let me cite a few of the latest indicators of erosion in Taliban authority and effectiveness, all occurring during the past several months. In March, Ismail Khan, the anti-Taliban former governor of Herat, escaped with two senior aides from a Kandahar prison where he had been held since 1997. In April, the Taliban-appointed governor of

Kunduz province was assassinated. More recently, we have reports of sabotage at Kabul airport. We also hear of Taliban difficulty conscripting new recruits for this year's spring and summer offensives, due to serious local resistance and low morale. There are equipment shortages for the Taliban war machine and serious splits within the Taliban movement itself. It is increasingly clear that many Afghans are giving up whatever hope they had for Taliban rule. Many would surely prefer a more inclusive, more effective, more tolerant and perhaps above all more peacefully inclined government, if that option were to become available.

### **Background of U.S. Policy**

What has been the U.S. response? I must emphasize that, contrary to some false and damaging allegations, the U.S. does not now support and has never supported the Taliban. When they took over the capital of Kabul in 1996, we told them we would look at what they did, and react accordingly. Well, what they have done, in a word, is horrendous. They have chosen to prolong their country's agonizing civil war, while oppressing its numerous ethnic and religious minorities. They have trampled on the human rights of all Afghans, especially women and girls. They have condoned and indeed profited from the deadly trade in narcotics. And they have condoned that other scourge of civilized society, namely terrorism, by providing among other things safe haven for Usama Bin Laden and his network. This is the murderer directly responsible for the loss of a dozen American and hundreds of other innocent lives in the East Africa embassy bombings two years ago. We believe Bin Laden continues to this day to plan further acts of international terrorism.

We have consistently and categorically opposed all of these Taliban policies. This is precisely the message that we have delivered directly to the Taliban in the course of all our contacts with them. I personally have met with Taliban officials in Kabul, Islamabad, New York and Washington. I regret to report today that they seem determined to ignore our message. If anything, the Taliban have moved even further in the wrong direction. On terrorism, not only have they refused to hand over Bin Laden as called for the UN Security Council, but they have aided and abetted other terrorists worldwide, including violent groups in Chechnya and Central Asia.

I want to make one thing very clear. The Taliban, and some of their supporters, continue to misrepresent our campaign against terrorism as an attack against Islam. Nothing could be further from the truth. We do not oppose Islam. We respect Islam. We do not oppose those who practice their faith in peace. We do not oppose those who have legitimate political concerns they want redressed. But we do oppose those who commit or condone criminal acts, especially those who commit murder and inflict grievous injury against civilians, in the name of any ideology, religion, or cause.

On human rights, though we have publicly recognized occasional local improvements, the central authorities in Kabul have regressed: witness the fate of Mary MacMakin that I referred to earlier, or the new edict forbidding females from working

even in international humanitarian activities. On narcotics, the Taliban have allowed Afghanistan to acquire, almost overnight, the distinction of the world's largest producer of illicit opium, thereby contributing to the destruction of countless additional lives every year. To borrow an expression from you, Mr. Chairman, Afghanistan has become a gateway country -- a gateway for some of the worst evils of drugs and violence, which daily pass through it enroute to other parts of the globe.

Finally, on the prospects for Afghan peace and reconciliation, the Taliban have not wavered from their commitment to a military solution. They talk of peace, even as they launch new military actions. They agree to exchange prisoners with the Northern Alliance under Islamic auspices, and then renege. Independent political figures and political opponents of the Taliban are shot down, including just a year ago the esteemed tribal elder Mr. Ahmed Karzai, whose son Hamad is here with us today to carry on his part of the traditional leadership and consensus-building role so sorely needed in Afghanistan today.

Mr. Chairman, my strong criticism of the Taliban should not be read to imply U.S. recognition for the opposition Northern Alliance led by Ahmed Shah Masood. The Alliance incorporates representatives of many of Afghanistan's minority ethnic populations, and appears to come closer to meeting international standards of human rights. Nevertheless, accurate information about conditions, including respect for human rights, in the northern areas under its control is scarce. We call on all those who are prolonging the needless fighting in Afghanistan to shift their focus instead to bringing peace and a broad-based representative government to the people of Afghanistan.

All of this raises the obvious question: What more can be done to deal with Afghanistan's ongoing tragedy, and with the risks it poses to others? While we have worked hard to develop a united front on Afghanistan with a number of key countries, multilateral diplomacy has had only a limited effect to date. The Six-Plus-Two group of Afghanistan's neighbors plus the United States and Russia has been unable to agree on concerted political action, and is now focusing on the narrower practical issue of counter-narcotics cooperation.

The UN Secretary General's previous representative on Afghanistan, Lakhdar Brahimi, resigned last year with little to show for his lengthy and tireless efforts, thanks largely to Taliban intransigence and the lack of commitment from external parties to use their influence with the warring factions to bring them to the negotiating table. His successor as of the beginning of this year, Francesc Vendrell, is making an admirable effort to address this acute tangle of problems, but wisely acknowledges the limitations of his mission's mandate and capabilities in light of Afghan realities. We are and will stay in close touch with him, and with others concerned about Afghanistan. We are planning a new series of meetings with Ambassador Vendrell and others at the UN this coming fall. At the same time, we need to consider what U.S. strategy is most appropriate in this situation.

## U.S. Strategy Today: A Two-Pronged Approach

Mr. Chairman, the strategy that we are pursuing today is two-pronged: First, firm pressure on the Taliban on the issues of greatest concern: terrorism, narcotics, and human rights. On terrorism, President Clinton took the lead last year by issuing Executive Order 13129, imposing unilateral sanctions on the Taliban designed to stop them from deriving any revenue or benefit from economic interaction with the United States. The UN Security Council followed up in October 1999 by unanimously adopting Resolution 1267, which puts in place mandatory sanctions against Taliban-controlled assets and international airline flights until Bin Laden is brought to justice. These sanctions, I want to stress, target only the regime, while providing unimpeded humanitarian access for all the people of Afghanistan. In April of this year, the Security Council agreed that further action might be required. We are actively exploring those options, which could include imposition of an arms embargo against the Taliban. We have also let them know, in no uncertain terms, that we will hold them responsible for any terrorist acts undertaken by Bin Laden from Afghanistan. We reserve the right to use military force in self-defense if required.

As we apply such pressure, we have also tried to engage the Taliban in a serious dialogue. Some members of the Taliban have told us they would like to improve their relations with us. They have even taken a few measures to demonstrate a willingness to work with us, such as restricting Bin Laden's access to foreign media. But we have seen no indication that the Taliban are ready to take the serious actions -- on Bin Laden or on other issues -- that would be necessary for any real improvement in our relations.

The second prong of our Afghan strategy is both broader and longer-term: to promote the greatest possible involvement of Afghans in the search for peace in their own country. What is needed, in our view, is a sincere negotiating process among Afghans themselves toward a broad-based, inclusive government which all the Afghan people, first and foremost, and then the U.S. and the rest of the international community, can accept, and which can take up the cause of rebuilding the country. This will require the involvement of a wide spectrum of Afghans inside and outside the country -- more than just the Taliban and the Northern Alliance.

For this reason, we are encouraged by the efforts of Afghans around the world to contribute to this search for peace, in groups meeting in Rome, Cyprus, Bonn, and elsewhere. Many advocate the convening of a *Loya Jirga*, or Grand Council, of Afghan leaders to forge a new national concord. This could be a traditional and constructive step toward ending Afghanistan's anguish. It would offer Afghans an alternative vision of their future, authentically both Muslim and moderate, and one that would promise peace without tyranny. Regrettably, it may be precisely the appeal of this initiative that has led the Taliban, according to new press reports this week, to instigate the arbitrary arrest of *Loya Jirga* proponents.

For our part, we have been meeting with such alternative Afghan representatives at a senior policy level, and have recently issued a statement of support for their legitimate objectives. In addition, we are providing modest financial support to the Rome-based effort, and diplomatic support for the Italian government's lead on this issue. We are asking other interested countries for their support as well.

Let me make one thing clear. Critics of those who are seeking to convene a *Loya Jirga* claim that its supporters want to reestablish a monarchy in Afghanistan, and return former king Zahir Shah to power. Zahir Shah has offered his prestige as elder statesman to this process in an attempt to restore peace to his shattered homeland, but we see no evidence that he or his colleagues seek to revive the monarchy. Rather, *Loya Jirga* is a leadership forum where all speak their minds freely and come to a political consensus. It is the traditional process Afghans have used for centuries to achieve resolution to crises in their land.

Mr. Chairman, it is time Afghans were allowed to restore equilibrium in their political affairs and tranquillity within their borders, without adverse outside interference. A traditional, sovereign Afghanistan at peace with its neighbors would be the best guarantee for stability in South and Central Asia as a whole.

### **International Cooperation**

This now brings me to a crucial aspect of implementing the two-pronged Afghan strategy I have just outlined: the necessity of cooperation with other countries in the region and beyond. This is not, and cannot be, an attempt to impose some kind of outside power diktat on the proud people of Afghanistan, which history teaches would be futile. What we seek is not so much confrontation with the Taliban, as common cause with all the other players who wish to contain and ultimately overcome the threats that the Taliban present. Accordingly, I would like to take just a few moments to highlight some of these players.

First, with regard to Russia, President Clinton and Russian President Putin recently agreed to form a bilateral working group on Afghanistan. This group should serve to improve diplomatic cooperation with Russia on this problem. It will also complement our ongoing counter-terrorism efforts. The first meeting of this working group will take place in the near future and will focus on joint means to counter the threat emanating from Afghanistan. This subject also figured prominently in the very detailed and useful discussions on South Asia that I conducted in Moscow in May.

With India, we have this year institutionalized very productive consultations on counter-terrorism, naturally with a special focus on Afghanistan and related South Asian issues. We share India's concern about the spillover from Afghanistan to other areas, including Kashmir, where violence is increasingly associated with foreign elements. We appreciate India's earlier closing down of Ariana flights to Amritsar and its strong cooperation in implementing the UN sanctions against the Taliban, in international counternarcotics and other law enforcement efforts.

Moving to Central Asia, the U.S. and the countries of that region took a significant step last month when we hosted a Central Asia counter-terrorism conference here in Washington. Representatives from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan all agreed with us to enhance cooperation in denying sanctuary or support to terrorists. This issue, and the broader issues of Afghanistan's overall fate, will remain high on the agenda in all of our high-level contacts with the Central Asian states. These countries have started working better with each other, with Russia through CIS channels, and with China in the "Shanghai Five" group to confront the common threats from Taliban-ruled Afghanistan.

This brings me to Pakistan, where the signals on these issues, frankly, are still mixed. Pakistan wants, as does the U.S., to see peace and stability in Afghanistan -- after all, it shares the longest common border with that country. We believe the government of Pakistan also understands that the "Talibanization" -- or radicalization -- of their country and of the region is something to avoid. Perhaps the recent incident in which the Taliban forcibly shaved the heads of a visiting Pakistani soccer team as punishment for wearing shorts -- while playing soccer -- will remind Pakistanis of the true nature of the Taliban yet again. Moreover, Pakistan seeks to build political and economic bridges to Central Asia, and realizes that terrorism and extremism in Afghanistan and South Asia are serious obstacles to such regional cooperation and stability. Indeed, Pakistan has made known its view that the presence of Usama Bin Laden is just such an obstacle. They helped facilitate a recent meeting between Under Secretary Pickering and Taliban officials in Islamabad on the U.S. case against Bin Laden. We also understand that Pakistan is quietly urging the Taliban to review some of their ties to terrorists.

At the same time, Mr. Chairman, Pakistani officials make the point that they do not control the Taliban. We believe, however, that Pakistan does have considerable influence in Afghanistan. The goal of our continued diplomacy is to urge Pakistan to use every aspect of its influence to convince the Taliban to render Usama Bin Laden to justice and shut down Afghanistan's terrorist networks altogether. More broadly, we would support a Pakistani initiative to find common ground with Iran and others in working together on a peaceful solution of Afghanistan's civil war. We are pleased that just in the past few days Pakistan Foreign Minister Sattar has met with a delegation from the Rome Process and expressed Pakistan's appreciation of the positive role Loya Junga could play.

## **Humanitarian Issues**

Mr. Chairman, I would now like to turn briefly to humanitarian issues. The human crisis in Afghanistan is eloquently summarized in the latest report by UN Secretary General Kofi Annan. Allow me to cite a few lines here:

"The situation of the Afghan people remains deplorable. Four years after the takeover of Kabul by the Taliban, visitors compare the city to a bombed-out city a few

years after the end of the Second World War, except that no reconstruction is in sight and its people have little hope for improvement. There is a growing process of pauperization throughout Afghanistan, exacerbated by the most severe drought in 30 years.

Afghanistan remains in a state of acute crisis -- its resources depleted, its intelligentsia in exile, its people disfranchised, its traditional political structures shattered and its human development indices among the lowest in the world."

I know you agree, Mr. Chairman, that the Afghan people do not deserve to suffer in this way. That is why the U.S. continues to lead the world in humanitarian assistance to the Afghan people, totaling around \$70 million annually in recent years, rising to a projected \$110 million in view of the extraordinary needs this year. Details are available in the attached fact sheet. Most of this funding is channeled through the specialized UN-affiliated relief and rehabilitation agencies, or through American and international NGO's. Their integrity, expertise and on-the-ground experience makes them the most effective conduits for such programs, which we hope will continue with your support. It is a sound investment, not only in averting humanitarian tragedy, but in preserving our friendship with the people of Afghanistan, while we and they await a better future.

We take special care, in this context, to ensure that our aid reaches those who need it most, including women. Since FY 1998, for example, we have provided assistance to programs in various regions of Afghanistan that involve women in local decisions and also provide them with job opportunities. These programs not only help local communities, but also integrate women into them as productive members, in a way both consistent with Islam and human rights standards, thereby fostering a more tolerant grass-roots culture in Afghanistan. We must also take into account extraordinary circumstances, such as the current disastrous drought, in adjusting our levels and types of aid. Our extra \$4 million so far this year in well-targeted and well-publicized drought relief has been very well received and should generate lasting goodwill -- as the photographs I brought along of Ambassador Milam on the docks of Karachi so vividly suggest.

## **Conclusion**

Mr. Chairman, let me conclude by saying that, from both the human and the political standpoints, the situation in Afghanistan remains extremely difficult, but not without some hope that conditions may be changing. As I said earlier, we believe the Taliban regime has reached its high-water mark. This is a regime which, by its behavior at home and abroad, has isolated itself from almost the entire world, and increasingly from its own people. There is a real sense in which Afghans and the concerned international community want many of the same things: An Afghan government that is representative, that respects human rights, that rejects rather than embraces narcotic traffickers and terrorists. I believe our strategy of pressure on the Taliban, support for alternative Afghan voices, and concrete cooperation with other countries on these issues can move us closer to that common objective. As we approach it, Mr. Chairman, it is my hope that Afghanistan can once again become a gateway nation of a different kind -- a

gateway for people, commerce, and cultural exchange between different parts of Asia and the world, in the positive sense that we would all desire to see.